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CLASSIFIED : Casey's threats to the news media mark a dangerous trend

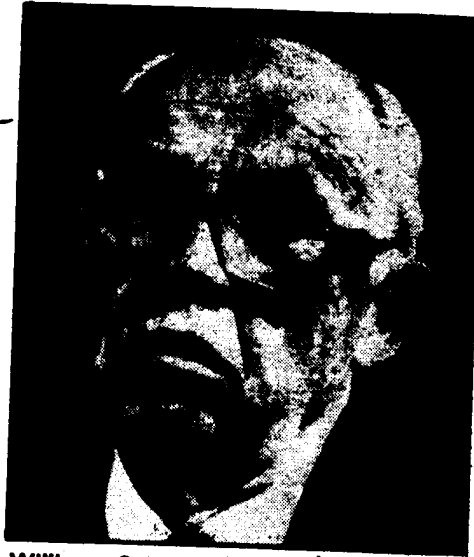
A MOST ATTEMPTS by the U.S. government to curb press coverage have, so far, ended in victories for the public. We can only hope the same will be true of CIA director William Casey's effort to have five major American news organizations prosecuted for disclosing classified information.

Last week, Mr. Casey told the Washington Post — one of the publications he says has broken the law — that he has discussed the possibility of criminal prosecution with deputy attorney General D. Lowell Jensen. Other news organizations that he said are guilty of "absolute cold violations" are Newsweek, the Washington Times, the New York Times and Time.

Two of the publications, he said, violated the law by reporting on intercepted Libyan communications. He was less specific about the alleged infractions of the others. Mr. Casey also suggested in a meeting with Post editors that that paper should be prosecuted if it chooses to publish material it has obtained from a former employe of the National Security Agency.

No news organization has ever been prosecuted under the 1950 statute Mr. Casey hopes will be invoked, which prohibits "knowingly and willfully" disclosing classified information about codes or "communication intelligence activities of the United States or any foreign government." Nor should any — as long as the government continues routinely to classify volumes and volumes of material that should be available to be discussed openly.

In light of previous overzealous attempts by some members of the Reagan administration to plug leaks and otherwise restrain the news media, Mr. Casey's offensive has to be taken seriously. Al-



William Casey: Another overzealous attempt to plug leaks

though the Justice Department has not acted — and perhaps will choose not to — Mr. Casey's vague threats are no small matter.

There's no better example of where government-imposed shackles on the news media can lead than in the Chernobyl incident, in which Soviet citizens and the rest of the world were kept in the dark about events that threatened their well-being. Americans, who are dependent on news media for information, surely do not want those media to become subject to government whim or officials' broad definitions of national security.

In such a case, the American people could find themselves no better informed than the poor souls of the Ukraine who, because they were not told the truth soon enough, if at all, may end up dying of radiation poisoning or radiation-induced cancer.